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AN EXPERIMENT IN PROBLEM-TEACHING

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High-school English is impractical and ultra-classic, and fails to interest at least half of the students. These criticisms have become trite with frequent repetition. For some time I have believed that "project"- or "problem"-teaching is a means of vitalizing English. Last September, with a Senior class of seventeen, I undertook to test the theory. We chose as the project for the year the writing, staging, and publication of a Senior-class play.

Here was a real problem. Yearly, student committees, English teachers, and dramatic coaches spend weeks in selecting what at best is most often a weak vehicle for dramatic expression. To write a play adapted to the community and to the prospective performers was an undertaking the immediate usefulness of which we could all comprehend. Moreover, and of infinitely more importance, the accomplishment of this single purpose was bound to lead us far and teach us a world of practical English.

A plot, our kingdom for a plot! But before a plot we needs must have a theme, and before a theme a first-hand knowledge of the homely mechanics of the drama. It was therefore necessary that we study plays. The boys urged that we begin with moderns and go back, if back we must, to older plays and playwrights. The rest of the class agreed. (Every new step was taken as the result of class discussion, instead of arbitrary assignment.) Modern drama, historic, social, symbolic, and realistic—thus we charted our course. A committee listed a complete bibliography of plays to be had from public, school, or private libraries in the village.

A number of plays were selected to be read by all. Class period was given over to readings from these plays, to discussion of what we were reading, and to dramatizing particularly strong passages or scenes. For example, we dramatized all of the strongest scenes

from *She Stoops to Conquer*, and for public performance the boys gave Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*. The plays read included: Marian Craig Wentworth's *War Brides*; Herman Hagedorn's *The Makers of Madness*; Rostand's *L'Aiglon*; Percy Mackay's *Jeanne d'Arc* and *A Thousand Years Ago*; Stephen Phillip's *Herod*; van Dyke's *House of Rimmon*; Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*; Josephine Preston Peabody's *The Piper* and *The Wolf of Gubbio*; Witter Bynner's *The Little King*; Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *Riders to the Sea*; Galsworthy's *Justice* and *The Pigeon*; Lady Gregory's *Seven Short Plays*; Yeats's *Land of Heart's Desire*; Kennedy's *The Servant in the House* and *Winterfeast*; Booth Tarkington's *The Man from Home*; and Goldsmith's *Good-natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer*. The absence of Shakespeare from the list does not mean omission. In their Junior year these students had studied *Hamlet* intensively, and all knew intimately at least one additional Shakespearean play. Thus they already had a knowledge of the best by which to measure other plays.

Withal, reading and dramatizing to the contrary, we still felt unprepared to write, since so few of the class had ever seen an even moderately great play staged. Because of this fact and since the Mesaba Iron Range is at no great distance from Duluth, we decided to see a great actor in a great play. A committee ascertained the engagements of the Duluth theatrical season and we set our intent upon earning the money to see Forbes-Robertson in *Hamlet* and *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. Until the date of the performance we endeavored to accomplish three things: to write trial plots, to decide upon one, and to earn the money for the trip. The last proved difficult but entirely feasible work, as a candy sale and a concert yielded adequate funds. But of the writing (and rejection) of plots there was no end. Each student submitted one or more and finally a choice was made. The accepted plot aimed to give "a bit of the Range" through a simple mining story, more or less ordinary, and a large infusion of local color. Range life was the theme, the hero a Finnish mining engineer, and the heroine the daughter of a Scotch-Irish mining superintendent. Croatian, Servian, and Finnish miners gave the iron-mining atmosphere.

But even with a plot in the rough, we felt that we did not know enough of the "how" of play-writing. Consequently the class, in squads, of two, undertook to dramatize a different short story, poem, or novel. Some of those worked out were "Ba, Ba, Black Sheep" by Rudyard Kipling, "Evangeline" by Longfellow, "The Convict" by White, and "A Transaction in Money" by Webster. Sketches or charts for stage setting, suggestions for scenic effects, and property lists accompanied each dramatic arrangement. The result was the desired first-hand knowledge of the mechanics of a play. This was scarcely accomplished when the trip to Duluth, Forbes-Robertson's interpretation of Hamlet, and a meeting and talk with the actor himself gave us a quickened inspiration. Enthusiastically, upon our return, we attacked the play, which we had named *The Man for the Place*.

The amplifying of the plot was our first task. This necessitated tearing it apart to insert additional incident and detail for the sake of interest and consistency. We roughly outlined the unbroken thread of the story, determined the number, name, and characterization of the persons of the play, and grappled with the first scene. The method was simple. We decided upon the incidents and thread of the story in a given scene and then every student wrote the scene alone. We came together, each read his own production, and all engaged in lively criticism with a view to noting carefully strong situations, live dialogue, bits of telling characterization, and originality in plot treatment. Our discussion resulted in a choice of the most strongly written scene or scenes, and all were handed in to the instructor. Here came a point where the instructor worked alone. By the next class period I had ready a compound of the best scene with insertions from, or changes suggested by, the other scenes. This went back to the class, was discussed, polished, and often again changed. Sometimes groups of two and three worked for several days on various sections of a scene. Thus was the completed product the best that seventeen students could do. Pit and office scenes required boys' work mainly, for several of them had spent a year in pit work during their high-school course. The girls naturally did better on home scenes.

More than once we needed technical advice—for example, in the main incident of our plot—a “slide” of ore on a paint-rock layer in an open pit “approach.” Accordingly we called in the chief engineer from the mining office and found him willing to suggest how such an accident might occur. Throughout our work the engineers in the Oliver office were generous in helping us secure accuracy in depicting mining and miners. Visits to the mines, conversation with miners, attendance at night school to get the dialects, kept us thoroughly occupied even while we wrote.

Finally, when the first draft of the play was complete, we wished criticism from some outside source. Discussion brought forth the idea of a studio tea, to which we invited about twenty-four people from village and school. To these the play was read and suggestions solicited. While at first judgment the suggestions seemed scattered, diverse, and confusing, they proved, with few exceptions, worth following. In interpreting the play at the tea, the reading was done wholly by students, a student reading the part to which he or she had most largely contributed in the writing. In a measure then the studio tea did much to show where lay the best dramatic material for the production of the play later.

After this much was accomplished, we still found hard work before us. The play was again changed, strengthened, and polished; of all the work this was least attractive and most like drudgery. It was difficult too for all to work at once with unity and purpose; but it was accomplished. The final typewriting of the whole and then of individual parts was done by the commercial students in the class.

As the production evolved from our hands we conceived the idea of an overture and music between acts, written expressly for and in the mood of the play. A boy of unusual native musical ability, a student from another class and our orchestra director, heard the play, grasped our idea, and undertook, not only the composition, but also the training of the high-school orchestra in its performance. His execution of both tasks fulfilled our hopes.

Trying out for parts, training, redecoration of old scenery, etc., kept us busy after the writing was finished. When the performance and a second performance were over, *The Man for the Place* went to the high-school printshop for publication.